

**The Convoluted influence of Robbins's thinking on the Emergence of  
*Economics Imperialism* \***

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the influence of Robbins's thinking in the subsequent development of *economics imperialism*. First, the analysis of some passages which have passed unnoticed up to the moment where the author explicitly expresses his disbelief in the omnipotence of the economic method makes it possible to defend that Robbins did not share the confidence in the capabilities of economics to explain non-economic phenomena which is exhibited by the advocates of *economic imperialism*. After that, the paper shows that Robbins describes the influence of *real* scarcity on human behaviour in terms of a (static) constrained maximization problem, mixing issues of method and scope up in his writings. This facilitated the view that economics is a method without a proper subject-matter, and the later expansion of economics into other fields. The conclusion is that, though Robbins cannot be counted as an earlier promoter of *economics imperialism*, the misunderstandings implicit in his writings paved the way for the emergence of this intellectual movement.

**JEL classification: B21, B31, B40.**

## 1. Introduction

From the second half of the last century up to now, economists have experienced an increased interest in studying topics that were previously considered to be intrinsically non-economic and so inaccessible to them – see Ierulli and Tommasi (1995, 1). As a consequence, an increasingly body of research has appeared whose topics range over issues such as the family, suicide, religion, politics, law, biology, etc<sup>1</sup>. The common denominator in these works is the way the former questions are approached: from the narrow methodological standpoint of the economic science, as Sen (1989, 326) explains – and, I would add, whatever the way the economic methodology is conceived. The large variety of topics that are currently covered by our science has led economists to the conviction that, as the title of Barro's book states, *Nothing is Sacred* (to the economic science), since "(...) economic reasoning is not just mathematics and [can] be applied to a wide variety of social problems (...) I think that no forms of social interaction – including religion, love, crime and fertility choice – are immune from the power of economic reasoning" [Barro (2003, xiii)]. Therefore, our science is no longer conceived to be defined by its subject, but by its method, as Ierulli and Tommasi (1995, 1) explain.

This relentless expansion of the economic science into other areas of knowledge has been known as *economics imperialism*<sup>2</sup>. Looking at this academic phenomenon with intellectual curiosity, (at least) one obvious question comes up to one's mind: what prompted economists to change their minds about the questions they could address with their science? Whenever one refers to the economic literature to investigate this issue, one finds different types of evidence that invariably point to Robbins's *Essay on the Nature and significance of Economic Science* (hereafter *Essay*) and, especially, to the definition of the science it contains, as the origins of the expansionist efforts economics.

Certainly, this is the impression that stems from one of the earliest episodes of confrontation between economics and other social sciences, i.e. the substantivist-formalist debate in Economic Anthropology. This well-known intellectual clash confronted the followers of Polanyi's conception of anthropology – who defended that "orthodox" economic theory could only be applied to the study of market societies, which are but one of the different ways the economy can be collectively organized<sup>3</sup> – with another group of anthropologists who considered that economic theory was applicable to the study of any kind of society, be its economy organized through a market system or not. The fact that this second group of authors generally agrees with Robbins's definition<sup>4</sup>, clearly favors the conclusion that his conception of economics fostered the expansion of this science. More interestingly, a similar impression follows from the inspection of the work of those (more recent) authors who endorse or directly engage in imperialistic ventures, for they usually cite Robbins' definition with approval and disregard the definitions of the science proposed by other economists – viz. Becker (1976), Stigler (1984), and Hirshleifer (1985).

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<sup>1</sup> To cite some examples of papers on such "non-traditional" topics see, for example, Hammermesh and Soss (1974), Azzi and Ehrenberg (1975), Fair (1978) and, more recently, Donohue III and Levitt (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Mäki (2009: 352) distinguishes between *economics imperialism* and *economic imperialism* and I adhere here to his classification.

<sup>3</sup> See Lodewijks (1994: 88-91) for a review of this debate.

<sup>4</sup> Burling (1962), Edel (1969) or LeClair (1962) are exemplars of the way economic anthropology was conceived by this second group of authors. Dalton (1961) is a good example of the ideas defended by the opposite band.

In the vast literature that comments on Robbins's *Essay*, the relation between his definition of the science and the emergence of *economics imperialism* is also suggested in different fashions, which differ in role attached to Robbins in the history of this intellectual movement. At the one extreme of the spectrum, we find those authors who consider that Robbins's definition simply made room for *economics imperialism*. For example, Backhouse and Medema (2009: 813) find a correlation between the acceptance of Robbins definition among the profession and the expansion of the economic science into the other disciplines and, consequently, they maintain that this definition "(...) laid a foundation that could be seen as justifying (...) the imperialism of economist's ventures" (o.c.: 805). Mäki (2009: 358) similarly argues that Robbins's definition "opens the door wider" than other definitions, which explains why it has been particularly suitable for explanatory expansion (o.c.:356). In a similar vein, Medema (2015: 71) writes that "the artistic license for economists to cross over into subjects traditionally noneconomic in nature came via Lionel Robbins's *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economics Science* in 1932". A few lines below this author concludes that "(...) there can be no question, however, that Robbins defined economics in a manner that naturally allowed for its extension beyond the analysis of standard market phenomena" (ibid.).

There are other authors who posit a more decisive influence (or active role) to Robbins in that his definition oriented the discipline towards the study of all human behavior. This position can be first found in Scoon (1943: 311) to whom Robbins's definition extended the scope of economics into other areas of human behaviour like the political, the military, the legal, etc. More recently we find authors like Hausman (1992: 91), who considers that Robbins's definition *makes* economics a study of most human behaviour, rather than the study of a particular domain; Giocoli (2003: 86), who defends that "(...) following Robbins's definition, the discipline does not apply solely to the analysis of the market system, but is concerned with every instance of means-ends behaviour regardless of the surrounding institutional framework"; or Marciano (2009: 128), who holds that the outcome of Robbins's reasoning is the suppression of the limits of the subject-matter of the science.

Finally, at the other side of the spectrum, there is the group of authors who count Robbins as an imperialist – that is to say, implicitly (or explicitly) suggest that Robbins shared with the imperialists their conception of the science. For example, to Harcourt (1979: 243) Robbins was one of the two purveyors (with Wicksteed) of the views defended by economist imperialists. Similarly, and attending to Siegers's (1992) account, the interdisciplinary character of economics "look[s] back on a solid tradition" (o.c.: 531) which – according to this author – begins with Robbins and integrates the contributions of other authors like Becker, Hennisman and Lindenberg (o.c. 544). Lastly, the sociologist Lars Údehn (2001:123) defends that "Robbins was (...) a precursor of theoretical economic imperialism, and also made some suggestions in this direction (...)".

This brief review shows that, though the conclusion that the emergence of *economic imperialism* appears in economic theory is related to Robbins's *Essay* seems unquestionable and would raise no eyebrows, the actual position of Robbins in regard to the limits of the economic analysis is more questionable. Despite this fact, I think one can safely say that the most extended view is that Robbins would have endorsed the

conception of economics as a “universal” science – in other words, conventional wisdom considers that Robbins believed in the omniscience of economic reasoning and would have promoted the expansion of the science to other areas of research. Kirzner (2000: 258-259) spells this general perception out<sup>5</sup> when he states that “In one sense, Becker’s position reflects an old lesson which economists learned from Lionel Robbins in 1932 (...) the self-same economizing, allocative aspect of human behavior which is salient in, say, the commercial areas of life conventionally dealt with in economic theory, is present, Robbins taught us, also in the religious or cultural fields of human endeavour (...) It might seem, then, that Becker’s extension of economic analysis (...) is simply the consistent application of the ‘Austrian’ (Robbins-Mises) position”. However, a few lines below this author criticizes this view and explicitly says that he intends “(...) to dispel such an impression. The Austrian tradition in economics which both Robbins and Mises were articulating, does not by itself lead to the economic imperialism of which Becker has, not without cause, been accused” (Kirzner, o.c.: 259). The fact that an additional and even more radical reading of Robbins’s position on the applicability of economics outside its traditional field stems from his writings is a clear indication that the question of whether this author should be properly classified as an imperialist is germane.

This paper attempts to clarify this point, to repeat: it aims at elucidating whether Robbins believed in the omnipotence of economic method, and therefore his *Essay* laid the foundations of *economics imperialism*, or he simply advanced a definition of economics which indirectly favoured its expansion into other areas of research. This issue is relevant not only to get a proper picture of Robbins’s thinking, but also to get a better understanding of the recent history of economics and the actual reasons why economics has expanded into other fields of research. To this end, the paper is organized as follows. The next section presents textual evidence from Robbins – some of which has passed unnoticed up to the moment – that exposes the views that these author holds about the economic method, which, as it will be shown, clash with those defended by the proponents of *economics imperialism*. Section three takes advantage of my previous research on Robbins’s definition and advances a plausible (and indirect) way in which Robbins can have facilitated the appearance of *economics imperialism*. Section four concludes.

## **2. Robbins’s views on the power and applicability of the economic method**

Mäki’s (2009) penetrating analysis of *economics imperialism* provides with a framework suitable for our investigation. According to Mäki, two types of *economics imperialism* should be distinguished: on the one hand we have *Economics imperialism*, which he defines as “(...) a form of economics expansionism where the new types of explanandum phenomena are located in territories that are occupied by disciplines other than economics” (o.c.: 360); on the other hand there is *Economics Imperialism*\* “(...) a form of economics expansionism where the new types of explanandum phenomena are located in territories that are occupied by disciplines other than economics, and where economics presents itself hegemonically as being in possession of superior theories and methods, thereby excluding rival theories and approaches from consideration” (o.c.:

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<sup>5</sup> Khalih (1996) expresses the same view in different terms when he says that “Robbins definition of the scope of economics came to provide the backbone to the argument of the universality of economics” (o.c., 17); “[Robbins] certainly has turned on the green light for orthodox economists to export the neoclassical kit into areas which have been traditionally part of other disciplines” (o.c., 22).

374). While this author considers that the first type of imperialism is not necessarily wrong nor intrinsically misguided, the second form should be resisted under all circumstances. Hence, we can make use of Mäki's descriptions to investigate whether some features of these two types of *economics imperialism* are present in Robbins's texts.

### 2.1. Robbins and economics imperialism\*

Let us first consider whether Robbins fits the *economics imperialism*\* category as depicted by Mäki. The distinctive trait of those authors who can be put under this heading is their conviction in the hegemonic character of economics, so that they regard this science as the “queen of the social sciences”<sup>6</sup>. So, if Robbins were an *economics imperialist*\*, one should expect to find passages where he explicitly claimed the superiority of the economic method – or at least defended its sufficiency to deal with economic issues. However, the evidence that comes from his texts points to exactly the opposite direction for, in some passages that have passed unnoticed up to the moment, Robbins (1949) explains that, even in the spheres where the economic interpretation can be applied “there are still significant limitations to the extent to which our technique, unaided by other knowledge, can yield results which are practically helpful” (o.c.: 102). More specifically, he explicitly states that a knowledge of economics by itself is not a sufficient guide to the practicability of policies because it is possible to devise a plan which is perfect from the analytical point of view, but that is administratively impracticable<sup>7</sup>. To avoid misinterpretation, Robbins explains that he does not mean that economists should remain aloof and abstain from participating in the grand debate of political economy; to the contrary, he explicitly recommends economists to engage in these discussions but at the same time he advise them to supplement their technical training with other kind knowledge:

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<sup>6</sup> This nickname of economics, which is mentioned among others by Mäki (2002:3), reflects the high status accorded to this science by many (if not all) advocates of *economics imperialism*. For example, to Brenner (1980) economics is a maturing science (in fact, the only one) because it is the only social science that has a unified paradigm capable of explaining a wide range of human behavior; Buckley and Casson (1993: 1041) consider that economics stands apart from the other social sciences because it is more advanced than other subjects in its theoretical development and they also defend that economics can provide with (at least some of) the core principles to be used in the process of unification of the social sciences (o.c. 1051); Hirshleifer (1994: 3) provocatively manifested his faith on the superiority of economics by predicting that, as economists began to study those modes of economic activity which involve conflict instead of cooperation among the agents involved, they “(...) will encounter a number of native tribes – historians, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, etc. – who, in the various *intellectually primitive ways*, have preceded us in reconnoitering the dark side of human activity. Once we economists get involved, quite properly we'll of course be brushing aside these a-theoretical aborigines” [emphasis added] – and in the footnote he adds: “when these researchers do good work, they are doing economics!”; Demzet (1997: 2) defends the primacy of economics on the grounds of its ability to “(...) explain phenomena within its traditional boundaries better than the other social sciences have explained phenomena within their respective boundaries”; Lazear (2000: 99) begins his well-known paper on *economics imperialism* stating that “By almost any market test, economics is the premier social science”. That this is the image of the science projected by the economics imperialists is corroborated by other authors, e.g. Thurow (1977), Heilbroner (1991) or, more recently, Fourcade, Ollion, and Algan (2014). Finally, Klammer (2008: 230) detects that this is the dominant view of the science among the graduate students of economics.

<sup>7</sup> With regard to this point, Robbins (1949: 103) states that “It is quite possible for a man to be a most brilliant analytical economist and yet to show the most childish ignorance both of administrative and political possibility”. This is a statement difficult to reconcile with the imperialists's conception of the science.

“But if they are to do this, they must transcend themselves as economists. If we are to throw helpful light on the great problems of our time, still more if, like Plato’s philosophers, we are from time to time to serve our term of public service, we must be prepared to go beyond our subject. We must be prepared to study not merely economic principles’ and applied economics; we must be prepared also to study many other disciplines. We must study political philosophy. We must study public administration. We must study law. We must study history which, if it gives no rules for action, so much enlarges our conception of possibilities.” (Robbins, o.c.:104)

Similar ideas are displayed by Robbins (1953) in subsequent paper in which he criticises Sir Dennis Robertson’s position that the series of changes economic science was experiencing at that time would diminish its utility and make it impossible for economists to give helpful advice. After refuting this view and defending that economists can provide with limited but relevant knowledge to the solution of social problems, in a passage that has been equally overlooked, Robbins concludes that their differences stem from the fact that:

“Sir Dennis would seek to endow his economist with a wider, although limited and appropriately diffident, authority derived from within economics itself. I feel that this hope is vain and that it is far better from the outset to look elsewhere for the measuring rods of appraisal. Sir Dennis has a more ambitious conception of what economics itself implies but would confine the economist to that sphere. I incline to a narrower view of what can be got out of economics alone and exhort the economist, if he hopes to be at all useful, deliberately to look outside”. (Robbins, o.c.:111)

In the concluding paragraphs of this paper Robbins warns against the risks of putting too much expectation on what can be got out from economics alone as well as he praises «the great masters» of economics because their educational background included much more than mere economic theory, so that they were able to invoke history and politics with authority.

Even more, in another work Robbins (1939) expresses in passing his cautions with the conclusions derived from the economic method, and admits the possibility that a logically consistent theory could produce a false explanation from an empirical point of view:

“To understand the mode of working of any kind of cause, it is proper and useful to construct models, as it were, of typical situations and to investigate how different motives may be conceived to operate. But to establish a logical possibility is far from establishing an historical influence or a present tendency. A theory may be misleading, not merely because of logical inconsistency, but also because of inadequacy to the facts of the situation; and as we have seen, it is probable that some at least of the attempts which have been made to explain war in terms of economics causes have been deficient for that reason. They are not logically impossible. But they do not fit the facts” (Robbins, o.c.: 120-121).

Notice that these ideas sharply contrast with the views expressed by the proponents of *economics imperialism*<sup>\*</sup>, to whom it is just the logical consistency of its approach which provides economics with the power to be applied to other territories – see, for example, Lazear (2000: 99). Contrary to this position, the former paragraph shows that Robbins

considered that it is possible to produce logically correct models that do not actually explain reality.

## 2.2. *Robbins and economics imperialism.*

In view of the foregoing passages, one can safely hold that Robbins did not share the conception of the science that *economics imperialism*<sup>\*</sup> entails. Nevertheless, there still remains the question of whether he believed in the applicability of the economic method outside the traditional areas of knowledge – that is to say, it remains to be elucidated whether he can be counted as an earlier promoter of *economics imperialism*. In fact, as we saw in the introduction, some authors really regard Robbins as a purveyor of this intellectual movement and even Údehns (2003: 123) presents some textual evidence from Robbins where he suggests that (at least some part) of political science falls within the scope of his definition of economics – which therefore seems to support the conclusion that Robbins was suggesting a direction in which economics could be expanded.

However, some feeling of unconfidence about the validity of this conclusion emerges if we look at the whole section of the chapter from which that text is excerpted, for a completely different picture emerges from Robbins's texts. In fact, the argument this author is putting forward in the seventh section of chapter five of his *Essay* is that economics cannot be used to explain changes in the data that economists take as given in their analyses – just the opposing view to *economics imperialism*. In these pages, Robbins successively denies the capability of economics to predict the changes in population, technique and political science, though in passing he makes some minor concessions to the applicability of economic analysis<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, Robbins closes this chapter stating that:

“Thus in the last analysis the study of Economics, while it shows us a region of economic laws, of necessities to which human action is subject, shows us, too, a region in which no such necessities operate. This is not to say that within that region there is no law, no necessity. Into that question we make no enquiry. It is only to say that from its point of view at least there are certain things which must be taken as ultimate data.” (*Essay*, 135).

In other words, Robbins is pronouncing against the possibility of endogenizing the elements that are considered to be exogenous in our explanations – which, notice, is exactly what *economics imperialism* proposes – for he believes that we, as economists, are not well-equipped to study just those aspects of reality we take as given. This is the ultimate reason why, for example, Robbins defended that economic analysis ends when

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Robbins (*Essay*, 132) admits that movements of population are responsive to money incentives and, consequently, concedes a very restrictive role to an economic theory of the equilibrium of population, but he explicitly denies the capability of this theory to predict changes in the population (*Essay*, 133). Subsequently, he expresses a similar disbelief in the capability of the science to predict changes in technique (*Essay*, 134). Finally, and regarding the political systems, though Robbins concedes that the legal framework is also responsive to economic factors and interests – and, in this sense, (some part of) it falls within the scope of the science; he explicitly denies that economics can be used to predict changes in it (*Essay*, 134-135). Just the opposing views are expressed by Frey (1999: 11) in his defense of *economics imperialism*, to whom “(...) economics seems to be better equipped to explain *changes* in human behavior, while sociology seems to be better equipped to explain historically existing *levels*” [emphasis in the original].

the process of explanation come across tastes since “(...) both individual valuations and technical facts are outside the sphere of economic uniformity (...) from the point of view of economic analysis, these things constitute the *irrational* element in our universe of discourse” (*Essay*: 106, emphasis in the original)<sup>9</sup>. This position drastically contrasts with the opinion that Becker and Stigler (1997) exhibit with regard the same matter. According to these authors, economists should not debate about tastes not because we lack the proper tools to investigate them, but “(...) for the same reason that one does not argue over the Rocky Mountains – both [tastes and the Rocky Mountains] are there, will be there the next year, too, and are the same to all men” (Becker and Stigler, o.c. 76). Instead, they defend that our toolkit suggests other direction to generate plausible explanations: to look at changes in the variables that determine the restrictions faced by the economic agents – mainly prices and income, in whatever “subtle forms” these variables may take.<sup>10</sup>

When additional evidence is considered, the discomfort with the position that Robbins believed in the ability of economics to explain “non-economic” facts increases. In the notebooks, correspondence and drafts consulted by Howson to examine the origins and nature of Robbins’s *Essay* there is an excerpt in which Robbins defended that his *Essay* “(...) always intended to be a sort of preliminary manifesto designed to forestall the criticism that I did not know where the borderline between the different disciplines really lay” – Howson (2004: 417). Once more, this is a statement that runs against the views expressed by the promoters of *economics imperialism*, who usually advocate for an unified social science under the leadership of economics [e.g. Brenner (1987), Hirschleifer (2002: xi) or Radnitzky (1992: 3)], while Robbins is clearly suggesting that there are limits between the different social disciplines that should be respected.

Even more revealing is the statement made by Robbins in his 1949 paper cited above that economic reasoning has a limited power, in the sense that there are problems to which “its technique is inapplicable” (o.c.: 100). Again, this assertion clashes with the opinions usually expressed by economist imperialists, who consider that economics is applicable to the study of all types of human behaviour – see Frey (1999). Subsequently in the same paper, Robbins also alerts economists to the danger of “overdoing the claim for economic interpretations”. With this expression Robbins refers to a tendency he detected at that time and which described in the following passage:

“In the century of the coffeehouse intellectuals everything must be a hundred per cent. In all sorts of connections, we are witnessing an overvaluation of the economic which is liable to lead to interpretations no less myopic and ill-proportioned, no less likely to

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<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in other work Robbins clearly states the differences in nature between the analysis made by the economists and the psychologists: “But, it may be asked, when we descend from these austere regions of pure theory and investigate the disposal of a particular scarce goods, in particular situations, are we not in fact making psychological investigation? (...) If we are attempting to ascertain the conditions of demand for fish in a particular market at a particular time we are indeed investigating psychological data. But we are not investigating them from the point of view of the psychologist. He wishes, presumably, to know why these things exist and to what law of psychic equilibrium or psychic genetics they conform. We, on the contrary, wish to know simply that they exist in order to discover, *in our own field according to the laws of our science*, what are the implications of such an existence” (Robbins, 1934: 99, emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup> In a subsequent paper, Michael and Becker (1973) offer a different – and complementary – reason for his rejection of this kind of explanations: economists lack of the appropriate theory to explain the formation of tastes neither they can rely on a well-developed theory from any other discipline – therefore, they must resort to “ad hoc” theorizing when explaining differences in tastes.

confuse our understanding of the complex springs of action that any which tended to ignore it. (...) The world is a very complicated affair. To understand it at all we must simplify. But woe betide us if we simplify to such an extent that essential ingredients are left out” (Robbins, 1949: 102).

Thought it is obvious that this paragraph cannot be read as a direct attack on *economics imperialism*, for Robbins is clearly referring to the forms of economic interpretation existing at that moment, it provides with indirect evidence on this point. For notice that, should Robbins had believed in the universal applicability of economic reasoning, one would have expected different statements coming out from his pen – i.e., assertions in which no risks of producing myopic and ill-proportioned explanations would arise from considering all problems from the economic point of view.

The textual evidence presented in this section leads to the conclusion that there is a case for the claim that neither Robbins shared the conception of the science by *economics imperialism*<sup>\*</sup> nor he advocated *economics imperialism* – or, at least, this textual evidence makes this interpretation plausible. However, as soon as this conclusion is reached, the question then arises as to how is it possible that Robbins’s definition has been read as an invitation to expand the economic method into other fields of research, given his stand on the universal applicability of economics.

### **3. Some confusions implicit in Robbins’s writings and their consequences for the subsequent development of economics.**

The crux of the problem of understanding how the most relevant proponents of *economic imperialism*<sup>(\*)</sup> may have seen in Robbins’s definition a justification to expand the limits of our science, even if this did not want to imply this, rests in the confusion between the concepts of “alternative uses” and “multiple ends” that operates in his thoughts. As I have extensively explained elsewhere this point – see Falgueras-Sorauren (2015) – here, I will limit myself to summarize my previous findings and then I will take the argumentation a step further.

To begin with the sketch of my previous paper, in that piece I showed that, by alternatively defining scarcity as the confluence of limited means and “alternative uses” (of the means) and as the existence of limited means and “multiplicity of ends”, Robbins subtly associated the notions of “alternative uses” and “multiplicity of ends”. Additionally, I argued that (i) this is an illicit association, for “alternative uses” appear even if “multiple goals” are absent in the mind of the chooser and, (ii) the presence of “alternative uses” is a factor that determines the existence of scarcity and, therefore, of actual economic problems. These conclusions suggest that Robbins’s famous definition can be split into two sub-definitions: a first one<sup>11</sup> that describes the conditions which, whenever they are present, make human behaviour exhibit the (economic) aspect that is relevant to the science; and a second one<sup>12</sup> that characterizes the method used by the science to study its subject matter. For obvious reasons, I dubbed the first sub-definition the notion of *real scarcity*, while I referred to the second sub-definition as the notion of *formal scarcity* – since it is a stylized way of capturing the problem of choice that

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<sup>11</sup> This is composed of the following separate fragments of Robbins’s definition (*Essay*, 16): “which studies human behavior” and “scarce means which have alternative uses”.

<sup>12</sup> This corresponds to remaining part of the definition proposed by Robbins, i.e. “as a relationship of ends and (scarce) means”.

appears when *real scarcity* conditions our behaviour. The fact that Robbins mixes these two different concepts in his definition of economics makes the method of the science indistinguishable from its subject-matter in his writings.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.1. Some misunderstandings embedded in Robbins's description of real scarcity

Advancing in the argumentation it is worth signalling that, as a consequence of this confusion of concepts, Robbins put empirical content to what actually are abstract assumptions that facilitate the analysis of real phenomena, thereby the formal characteristics that serve to represent the influence of scarcity in our theoretical constructions of the science are considered to be attributes of *real scarcity*. For example, as I explained in my previous paper, one of the hypotheses implicit in the concise way Robbins described the notion of *formal* scarcity is (the possibility of making) a clear-cut distinction between means and ends in human action – see Falgueras-Sorauren (2015: 25-26). This is just the way Robbins conceives human action in his *Essay*: as if the categorical distinction between ends and means *took place in reality* and there were some elements in human behaviour that, *considered by themselves*, would always play the role of ends, while there were other elements that would always play the role of means. In fact, this distinction is at the heart of Robbins's rejection of ends from the sphere of economics, which is introduced by this author (*Essay*, 24ss) to keep this science apart from ethics, for it is the ultimate ends pursued which provide with part of the criteria to evaluate human action. Hence, only if there are elements that always play the role of ends in human action and they can be neatly distinguished from those which always play the role of means, the necessary separation of ethics and economics implies the expulsion of ends from the scope of the science.

The problem with this view is that this neat distinction can only be made with two elements of human behaviour, to say: those which fall under the categories of the “ultimate end” and the “ultimate means”. As I have showed in my previous paper, human action is articulated into a complicated chain of means-ends relationships, and the vast majority of links of this chain are located between those two extreme types. In this intermediate region a given link or element plays the role of end or means relative to the situation considered – so its status varies with the “section” of human action which is being studied, see Rivett (1955: 219)<sup>14</sup>. Thus, in this middle area, ends are not

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<sup>13</sup> The confusion between *real* and *formal scarcity* is at the heart of the disagreement between Cannan (1932, 426-427) and Robbins (*Essay*, 11), and it is the reason why both authors offer (partially) correct arguments and cannot reach an agreement. As it is well-known, Robbins criticizes Cannan because his definition of the science cannot account for decisions regarding the use of time between productive and non-productive activities, which have an economic aspect – note that they imply giving up alternatives. To this objection Cannan replies with the following counter-example: “we may have, for example, to decide whether to refuse to work overtime when an urgent order has suddenly come in and thereby offend our employer and damage our industrial prospects, or break an appointment with the young woman we are courting and damage our matrimonial prospects”. According to the explanations in my other paper this dispute revolves around the distinction between these two concepts: Robbins is right in stating that decisions regarding the use of time – for they are influenced by *real scarcity*. Nevertheless, Cannan is also right in claiming that these problems are “problems of life” and that they lie partly inside and partly outside of economics: notice that they cannot be fruitfully analyzed with the method of economics – that is to say, they cannot be framed in terms of *formal scarcity* – because this analysis provides no additional insight into their nature nor it sheds light on their solution.

<sup>14</sup> To put this idea differently, though in a formal analysis of human behaviour it is legitimate to classify the elements at hand into these as means or ends, this practice should not lead to the conclusion that the role assigned in the theory to a given element is in the nature of things. To do justice to Robbins, it must

necessarily associated with ethics, for it is perfectly possible to have purely technical ends. In the same line, it is also possible to speak of economic ends, both from an individual and from a social viewpoint – e.g. see Prachowny (1994). Indeed, there are inconsistencies in Robbins’s arguments regarding the clear-cut categorization of human action, for there are some passages where Robbins defends the existence of an “economic motive” for action as well as in other works he recognizes that the price system is a social means for producing and distributing goods.<sup>15</sup>

The second theoretical assumption that Robbins slides in his account of *real scarcity* is the existence of hierarchically ordered goals. To Robbins, it is a matter of everyday experience that individuals can and *do actually* arrange their preferences in an order, so this fact is obvious and does not require controlled experiments to establish its validity (*Essay*: 76, 79). Therefore, he considers that this assumption is applicable whenever the conditions that give rise to economic phenomena are present (*Essay*: 80). Congruently, in his description of the conditions under which the division of Robinson’s time between the production of income and the enjoyment of leisure has an economic aspect, Robbins lists the existence of a ranking of ends as a necessary element for an economic problem to appear:

“Nor again is the alternative applicability of scarce means a complete condition of the existence of the kind of phenomena we are analysing. If the economic subject has two ends and one means of satisfying them, and the two ends are of equal importance, his position will be like the position of the ass in the fable, paralysed halfway between the two equally attractive bundles of hay. But when time and the means for achieving ends are limited *and* capable of alternative application, *and* the ends are capable of being distinguished in order of importance, then behaviour necessarily assumes the form of choice (...) It has an economic aspect” (*Essay*, 13-14)<sup>16</sup>

But including the existence of a hierarchy of ends among the required elements for human behaviour exhibit an economic aspect is misleading since, using the same example as Robbins, Robinson’s behaviour is affected by *real scarcity* even if he were unable to rank his preferences and, thereby, to make a decision. Notice that, even if he could not make up his mind and remained paralysed like the ass of the fable, he would still incur in an opportunity cost, to say: the outcome he could have obtained if he would have made a decision. This opportunity cost reflects the fact that, by not choosing at all, Robinson still spends time in doing nothing – and time is scarce because it *has* other productive uses, not because Robinson *is capable* of making a choice<sup>17</sup>. To insist upon, a state of indecision does not eliminate the influence of *real scarcity* on human behaviour because it is the existence of (productive) uses for time, the resource the chooser is using – in this case wasting –, and not her ability to make decisions which makes it scarce.

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be recognized that there are passages where he recognizes the existence of intermediate goals in human action– see *Essay* (15n, 31). The problem is that it seems he does not realize that this affects his conception of the relation between ethics and economics.

<sup>15</sup> See Robbins (1939: 116-117) and Robbins (1947: 5, 10), respectively.

<sup>16</sup> See also the associate footnote. Insisting upon this point, Robbins later defends: “[the assumption of schemes of valuation] is really an assumption of one of the conditions which must be present if there is to be economic activity at all. It is an essential constituent of our conception of conduct with an economic aspect” (*Essay*: 76).

<sup>17</sup> To this respect, Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988:8) explain that doing nothing or maintaining the status quo is an alternative that is present in (almost) all real-world decision problems.

### 3.2. *The tacit association of real scarcity and static constrained maximization problems that takes place in Robbins's writings*

Looking back at the reviewed pieces of evidence it becomes clear that the theoretical assumptions comprised by the notion of *formal scarcity* correspond to the constitutive elements of a constrained maximization problem<sup>18</sup>. Hence, the confusion between *real scarcity* and the way *it is represented* in theory (*formal scarcity*) that takes place in Robbins's writings implicitly conveys an association of *real scarcity* with the formulation of a static constrained maximization problem. This association is manifest not only in the different passages where Robbins describes the economic aspect of human activity<sup>19</sup> but also in the alternative characterization of the economic problem that appears in chapter six of the *Essay*, where Robbins depicts it in terms of the dual formulation of an utility maximization problem: the problem of minimizing the expenditure required to secure given ends – see *Essay* (145). Notice also that this conclusion is in line with the existing view that Robbins was defining economics in terms of a constrained maximization problem – see, for example, Colander (2009), Hodgson (2008: 136).<sup>20</sup>

The problem is that this illicit association of *real scarcity* with the formulation of a static constrained maximization problem has had a great impact on the later development of the economic science. But before presenting a brief sketch of this influence, and to avoid misunderstanding, let me clarify that I am not claiming against the use of constrained maximization problems as a method to formally capture the influence of *real scarcity* in human behaviour; what I am defending instead is that the influence of *real scarcity* cannot be understood in terms of this type of mathematical problem, as Robbins does in his writings, since it does not capture all the features of *real scarcity*.

This last point comes to light as soon as we reconsider the Robbins's exemplification of what he calls the simplest economic problem. In the discussion that follows his description of the problem, Robbins explains that if the individual has ample means to reach a given end, his behaviour is not affected by *real scarcity*, and the conduct “assumes none of the forms which are the subject of economic science” (*Essay*, 13). This is an incorrect appreciation for two different reasons. Firstly, in this example Robbins obviates the fact that, even if the economic problem is not relevant to the individual chooser – because he has ample means to do whatever she wants – it still can

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to the two assumptions commented in this paper – recall: a clear-cut division between ends and means of action and the existence of a hierarchy of ends – the notion of *formal scarcity* also entails the assumption that these hierarchically ordered ends can be weighted in such a way that progressive comparisons among them are possible – or, in other words, that trade-offs can be computed, see Falgueras-Sorauren (2015: 27-28).

<sup>19</sup> See *Essay* This association is also at the heart of the subtle way in which Robbins first introduces choice in the description of the subject matter of the science and, then occasionally transmutes choice into its actual subject-matter – see Falgueras-Sorauren (2015: 23).

<sup>20</sup> In fact, Robbins incurs in a threefold reductionism: he equates *real scarcity* with the formulation of a static constrained maximization problem, then he equates this type of mathematical problem with the problem of choice and, finally, he equates choice with choice under the influence of scarcity. Hence, it gives the impression that all kinds of choices can be studied with constrained maximization problems. This position is correctly criticized by Polanyi (1957:246), who denounces that alternatives can appear because of moral reasons or because of the presence of abundant means – so that choice cannot be reduced to economic choice.

be relevant to the rest of the society – because the means the individual chooser is using are affected by *real scarcity*<sup>21</sup>. As a result of this omission Robbins fails to notice that the level at which the problem of scarcity becomes relevant can be different in each particular case, as Buchanan (1964:214) denounced: sometimes, it would be relevant at individual level, while in other circumstances it would be only relevant at the social level<sup>22</sup> – and, in most cases, it is relevant at both levels.

The former example is also incorrect because it implicitly associates the emergence of *real scarcity* with the size of the cost<sup>23</sup> it imposes on human behaviour, whereas the relevant point to this question is whether means are limited and have alternative uses. When these conditions are fulfilled, our behaviour is affected by *real scarcity*, and there exists a cost of using means. On the other hand, the quantity of limited means that we have at our command determines the size of the cost that *real scarcity* imposes on our behaviour: the greater this quantity is, the lower this cost is – because the number of alternative uses that must be sacrificed is also reduced<sup>24</sup>. And obviously, as this cost diminishes, our choice becomes less constrained, so that we may even not *feel* constrained by *real scarcity* – but in fact, we are. That is to say, whenever limited means have alternative uses our behaviour is constrained by *real scarcity*, independently of the fact that this constraint is currently binding or not. For this reason, means are scarce even when they are relatively abundant and we do not feel that our choices are constrained by *real scarcity*. Take the example of the problem of exploiting an exhaustible resource: the resource is scarce even if the quantity currently available is enough to meet all our requirements – so, scarcity does not currently constraint our behaviour – for we all know that the use of unit of the resource today impedes the use of the same unit tomorrow, so that the resource is depletable. That is the reason why it makes sense to consider what the optimal rate of extraction of the resource should be, as the famous paper by Hotelling (1931) does. However, this characteristic of *real scarcity* is missed in a static constrained optimization problem, which can only represent the influence of real scarcity on the chooser's behaviour if the relevant constraints are binding.

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<sup>21</sup> Notice that, when a particular person makes use of a scarce resource, the quantity is not available to other members of the society – see my explanations in Falgueras-Sorauren (2015:17-19), as well as Hazlitt (1979) who (especially, in chapters II and III) put many examples of how scarcity can be relevant at social levels.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, this is the case that underlies the justification of distributive policies.

<sup>23</sup> Obviously, this is an “opportunity cost”: the cost of foregone alternatives. It should be noted that the argument of the text does not conflict with Buchanan's (1969; 1973) approach to the subject. Here, I am referring to the conditions under which an “opportunity cost” appears – which can be objectively determined, for they depend on the existence of alternative uses of a limited resource. To avoid confusion, this issue should be kept separate from the topics discussed by Buchanan – e.g. is it always possible to calculate the size of this opportunity cost?, is the opportunity cost subjective or objective in nature? Notice that the answer to the former question determines the relevance of the latter ones, but not the contrary: if a given use of a means has no alternatives, nothing is given up when the person acts or chooses, so no opportunity cost appears. In this case, the second group of questions becomes irrelevant.

<sup>24</sup> Notice that this does not imply that the opportunity cost disappears: each time we use a scarce means, it cannot be used for other purpose. Take the simple example of (monetary) wealth: the opportunity cost of spending money is very low for a very rich person. As he can dispose of a great amount of this scarce resource, the quantity of alternatives that he has to renounce when he spends one Euro is nearly insignificant. In this case his monetary constraint is not binding. However, this does not change the fact that each time he spends a Euro on a thing or activity, he cannot spend the same Euro on something different – that is the reason why he can fall into ruin!

### 3.3. A sketch of the influence of Robbins's confusions in the later development of economic science

The false impression that the influence of *real scarcity* into human behaviour is completely captured by the formulation of a static constrained maximization problem initiated a process which ultimately resulted in the emergence of *economics imperialism* and that can be summarized as follows<sup>25</sup>. Notice that, once this view is accepted, the problem of making optimal use of scarce resources can be equated to maximizing subject to constraints – see Simon and Blume (1994: 411) – and Economics can be reduced to solving constrained optimization problems – see Dixit (1990: 1). Furthermore, the fact that the different elements of these optimization problems can be read in terms of some key concepts of economics<sup>26</sup> seems to reinforce these conclusions. Then, the economist directly reads an empirical content in his analytical tools, which facilitates reasoning backwards and conclude that, each time a given phenomenon has been framed in terms of a constrained optimization problem, the economic dimension of an empirical problem has been captured. In other words, the economist gains the impression that all that is needed to analyse real economic problems is to frame the situation at hand in terms of a constrained optimization problem. From this it only takes one (very little) step further to proclaim that economics is simply a method of research with no proper subject-matter<sup>27</sup>, which is a position that conveys: (i) the idea that economics can be applied without limits, which is currently so extended that it can be even found in textbooks, for example in more provocative text by McKenzie and Tullock (1978) or, more recently, in the excellent manual by Barreto (2009), (ii) a shift of the economists' interest to the technical and mathematical analysis, as Ashman (2012: 6) explains – and these are two key features of *economics imperialism*.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has studied a topic that has received relatively little attention in the literature on Robbins's definition: to what extent can this author be considered as an earlier promoter of *economics imperialism*? It has showed that, if we take into account Robbins's position regarding the capabilities of economics analysis, he cannot be counted as purveyor of this intellectual movement; even more, in the light of the pieces of textual evidence presented here, it does not seem implausible to defend that he may have even opposed the theoretical incursions of the economists into other fields of research. The final outcome of this paper is a more accurate view of the influence of Robbins's work on the subsequent development of the science: though he didn't believe in the unlimited power of economic reasoning – as economic imperialists do – and therefore he should not be counted as a direct founder of *economic imperialism*, the

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<sup>25</sup> To be sure, I am not claiming that Robbins was the only responsible for the process explaining in the text. Clearly, history is more complex, and Robbins's work exhibited a great degree of complementarity with the work of other influential authors, especially Hicks (1939/2001) and Samuelson (1983). Nevertheless, exploring this issue would require (at least) another different paper, and the analysis developed suffices for the aims of this investigation.

<sup>26</sup> Apart from the elements already discussed in the paper, there are other elements of static that have a great economic content, e.g. the lagrangian multiplier reflects the opportunity costs or shadow prices of the use of resources – see Dixit (1990: 40-54) or Silberberg (1990: 204-206, 313-315).

<sup>27</sup> This view found its way into the textbooks – see, for example, Silberberg (1990:2) or Heyne (1997: 4-6)

confusions that are implicit in his thoughts indirectly paved the way to this intellectual movement.

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